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ABSTRACT

Regardless of family form, there is a universal belief that one's family is the most powerful agent of socialization. A sample of 38 junior high school students from single parent and nuclear families completed a questionnaire in order to examine the relative effects of peer influence and family influence in single parent and nuclear families. Results showed that children from both nuclear and single parent families are more influenced by parents than by peers. The findings indicate that regardless of the emotional upheaval of divorce parental influence in single parent and nuclear families is similar. Further research is needed to investigate changing parental influence immediately following divorce, since it is possible that there is less parental influence during the 2-year peak period after divorce and that influence is restored as time passes. (JAC)

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FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

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FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Today's society is one in which the family structure no longer solely consists of the two biological parents and their offspring. It is also comprised of single-parent families which are headed by either the mother or father. Regardless of family form, Perkins & Kahan (1979) point out that there is a universal belief that one's family is the primary and most powerful agent of socialization to which one belongs. During adolescence, however, many parents fear that their influence wanes and that peer influence dominates. This fear may be intensified for single parents who feel that their influence has already been weakened by the trauma of divorce. The intent of this study was to determine if parents had more influence over their children than peers even when the nuclear family had been dismantled.

Norton (1979) reported that there were over 6.3 million one parent families presently affecting 11.7 million children. More than 90% of these children lived with their mother only. Research over the past few years has shown that children in these families may exhibit deficits in cognitive performance (Biller, 1974; Shinn 1978), have poor self concepts (Parish, 1983), and exhibit increased inappropriate or undesireable behaviors (Parish 1980). Males, especially, have been found to be more delinquent and exhibit more anti-social behavior and less self control (Hetnerington, Cox & Cox, 1978).

There is also evidence that the interaction between parents and children change as a result of the single parent family structure. Colletta (1979) found that the parent tends to use a more erratic form of disciplinary action and may be more irritable in response to the child's demand for attention. Kachur (1980) suggested that the single parent may be less sensitive to the child's distress as a result of the divorce or separation, and has less energy available to deal with the child's problem let alone their own.

Hetherington, Cox & Cox (1978) state, however, that in the years following divorce order is restored as the single parent adapts to the new family structure.

Regardless of family structure, peer group relationships become increasingly important during the adolescent years. Elkind (1971) suggests that the emphasis on peer relationships help the adolescent to begin to assimilate information which he views as essential in establishing an identity and self growth. Peer groups fill the void in the adolescent's life as he/she becomes more introspective and pulls away from his parents in an attempt to establish himself as an independent adult.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relative effects of peer influence and parental influence on children from single parent families and from nuclear families. Given the additional stress of the single parent family one might predict that these children would rely more on their peers for emotional support and interaction. Specifically, children in single parent families may be less influenced by their parents and more influenced by their peers than children in nuclear families. A questionnaire was developed to provide a source of information on the hypothesis.

Subjects

A total of 38 junior high students (19 male, 19 female) participated in the study. The subjects attended a midwestern, middle class junior high school in Crystal Lake, Illinois. Nineteen of the subjects were from single parent families with divorce being the primary reason for family lifestyle. Nineteen of the subjects were from nuclear families where both biological parents and the original family system were still intact.

Apparatus

A 40 question survey was developed containing 13 questions that indicated high parental influence, 13 questions that indicated high peer influence, and 14 questions that contained neutral content. A point Likert Scale was employed. The survey was balanced for social desireability and pretested on a group of college-age students for content validity and clarity.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during the regular school day in an available classroom. Instructions to the students asked that they respond to a survey that contained items measuring attitudes of junior high students. They were asked to judge statements on a 5-point scale which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Each subject received a score for parental influence and a score for peer influence. A Two Factor Mixed Design Anova indicated that there was a main effect for type of influence. Parental influence appeared to play a more prevalent role for both groups.

The results indicate that children both from nuclear families and single parent families are more influenced by parents than by peers. Hetherington, Cox & Cox (1978) suggest that disorganization and disrupted family functioning seem to peak at one year and begin reestablishing approximately two years following divorce.

In the present study, 14 of the 19 single parent children were from a divorced family, 4 were from families where the parents were separated, and 1 was from a single parent family resulting from parental death; no data was gathered on how long the parents had been divorced or separated. Therefore, it is possible that these single parent families had already survived

the stressful period and parent child relations were restored.

Further research needs to investigate the changing parental influence immediately following divorce, since it is possible that there is less parental influence during the two-year peak period and that influence is restored as time passes.

This study indicates that regardless of the emotional upheaval associated with divorce, the parental influence in singel parent and nuclear families is similar.

Example Questions

Peer Influence

1. If my best friend and I disagreed on a subject, I would change my opinion just to save the friendship.

2. I need the support of my friends when making decisions, and would back down on an idea if they were not in total support of me.

Parental Influence

1. If I were having a bad problem at school I would seek advice from my parents over the advice of my friends.

2. If my parents and I disagreed on a subject, I would change my opinion to save my relationship with them.

Table 1

Mean Scores for Type of Influence by Type of Family

Type of Family	Type of Influence: Peer	Type of Influence: Parental
Nuclear	34.11	40.58
Single Parent	35.79	39.16

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